

## COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 29, 2006

### STEBBINS COLD CANYON RESERVE ACQUISITION

File No. 05-105

Project Manager: Betsy Wilson

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$46,000 to the Regents of the University of California for the acquisition of approximately 59 acres for inclusion in the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve, located above the southeast shores of Lake Berryessa in Napa and Solano Counties.

**LOCATION:** Above the southeast shores of Lake Berryessa and Highway 128, in Napa and Solano Counties

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

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#### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Blue Ridge Loop Trail Map

Exhibit 3: Site Photographs

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

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#### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed forty-six thousand dollars (\$46,000) to the Regents of the University of California (“the University”) for the acquisition of Napa County Assessor’s Parcel Number 019-250-005 and Solano County Assessor’s Parcel Number 101-010-010 (“the property”), consisting of approximately 59 acres located adjacent to the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve in Napa and Solano Counties as shown in Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the University shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“the Executive Officer”):

- a. All relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to escrow instructions, a current appraisal, environmental assessments, purchase agreement, title reports, and documents of title necessary to the acquisition of the property.
  - b. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The University shall pay no more than fair market value for the property.
3. The University shall permanently dedicate the property for habitat preservation, open space protection, and public access, through an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer. Promptly after acquiring each of the parcels, the University shall incorporate them into the existing Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve, for the benefit of the University of California Natural Reserve System.
4. Restoration of the portion of the existing Blue Ridge Loop Trail that crosses the property shall be completed within five years of the University acquiring the property.
5. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property, the design and location of which has been approved by the Executive Officer.

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31160-31165.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.

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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

This project will result in the acquisition by the University of California (“the University”) of two parcels totaling approximately 59 acres above the southeast shores of Lake Berryessa in Napa and Solano Counties (“the property”). The property will be included within the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve, a 576-acre reserve that is part of the University of California Natural Reserve System (UCNRS) and managed by the UC Davis Natural Reserve System (UC Davis NRS).

The property, currently in private ownership, is adjacent to the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve. The Reserve is comprised of State Department of Fish and Game (DFG) land to the east, U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land to the south, and UCNRS land to the southeast (Exhibit 1). Primary access to the property is a narrow public use hiking trail leading from Highway 128 up through DFG lands. The property has been valued at \$46,000 in a Conservancy-approved appraisal.

Acquiring the property will provide for continued and improved public access on the Blue Ridge Loop Trail (Exhibit 2), a 4-mile loop hike up Cold Canyon and then to the Blue Ridge with views of Lake Berryessa and the surrounding area. The *Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area (BRBNA) Conservation Framework* identifies the Blue Ridge Loop Trail as the most popular hiking trail in the 785,000-acre Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area. The loop trail traverses the property as well as land owned by the DFG, BLM, and UCNRS; the portion of the trail on the property is the only portion of the loop trail that is not in public ownership. Re-routing the loop trail to avoid the two privately-owned parcels is impractical as it would entail extensive disruption to habitat and traversing of rock cliffs. In addition, the two privately-owned parcels that comprise the property provide the most spectacular views along the entire loop trail from a large rock outcrop overlooking Monticello Dam and Lake Berryessa.

Currently, the Blue Ridge Loop Trail is extremely steep and eroded as it crosses the property (see photos in Exhibit 3). Purchase of the property by the University will allow the UC Davis NRS to restore the existing trail, including trail realignment, revetment, and installation of steps. The proposed trail work will reduce erosion, restore affected areas, and make the trail safer for the public. The UC Davis NRS will coordinate improvement of the trail and will provide management of the Reserve in perpetuity.

Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve, one of the few natural reserves in the UCNRS that serves the dual purposes of academic research and public use, hosts about 7,000 to 8,000 visitors annually. Improvement of the trail would make the Monticello Dam overlook area available to the many University classes and researchers who use the Reserve. The overlook outcrop area provides habitat not accessible by trail elsewhere on the Reserve. A popular public education program created and run by the UC Davis NRS will also have improved access to the area for its wide variety of subjects, ranging from natural history to art. Many hiking clubs, naturalist groups, and K-12 classes use the Reserve and loop trail as well.

There are significant habitat values on the property, including specialized rock outcrop flora and a peregrine falcon aerie. In addition, the property is a part of the Cold Canyon area, which provides habitat for a surprising divergence of plants and wildlife. Cold Canyon and adjacent Wildhorse Canyon provide a public wildlands corridor along the Blue Ridge that extends for over 70 miles. These canyons provide access to the upper watershed of Putah Creek for wildlife that is now unavailable elsewhere since the completion of Monticello Dam in 1957. The property is comprised of the only two private parcels in the area which have a direct impact on the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve; therefore, purchase of the parcels by the University will provide greater protection and integrity for the Reserve as a whole. Continued integrity of large areas of wildlands in the area is imperative for a large-scale functioning ecosystem.

The Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve is one of 35 reserves in the University of California Natural Reserve System (UCNRS). The UCNRS is the largest and most diverse set of university-owned and operated reserves in the world and include examples of nearly every major ecosystem in the state. These reserves provide secure sites for long-term environmental research, education and public outreach, enable monitoring of environmental health, and provide a baseline for ecosystem restoration, in the context of California's rapidly growing population and the changing global environment. Six reserves in the UCNRS are administered by the UC Davis NRS. The Conservancy previously assisted the UC Davis NRS with acquiring 75 acres for inclusion in McLaughlin Natural Reserve and 549 acres for inclusion in Quail Ridge Reserve, as well as in establishing a docent training and public education program for Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve.

**Site Description:** The property is composed of two contiguous vacant hillside parcels of 18.40 and 40.91 acres, located above the southeast shore of Lake Berryessa and Highway 128, in Napa and Solano Counties (Exhibit 1). The property is divided by the Napa/Solano County line along Blue Ridge. Property to the north and west of the subject are owned by the State of California as part of Highway 128 and required setbacks. To the east is DFG land and to the south BLM land.

The entire property is very steep, with elevation rising from approximately 600 feet just above Highway 128, to approximately 1,300 feet at the ridge. The property has been left in a natural state for use as recreational with limited access. The habitat on the property is a combination of sheer rock walls studded with trees, open grassland with oaks, and large expanses of chamise chaparral (see Exhibit 3 for site photographs). There are significant habitat values on the property including specialized rock outcrop flora and a peregrine falcon aerie.

The primary access to the property is a narrow public use hiking trail leading from Highway 128, up through DFG land, and over the subject property to a ridge trail. This trail has been used by the general public for years for recreational day use within the Cold Canyon area. The trail is marked on mappings at the trailhead as well as on a UC Davis website for their Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve.

Upon acquisition by the University, the property will be included in the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve. The Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve provides excellent opportunities to study plant and animal communities of both the inner and outer Coast Ranges. Differences in slope, exposure, and moisture regimes promote a variety of undisturbed habitats, including valley and foothill grasslands, blue oak woodland, chamise chaparral, lower montane chaparral, mixed riparian woodland, and intermittent foothill stream. Year-round springs provide watering areas for many wildlife species, such as bear, mountain lion, deer, ringtail, and turkey. All together, 108 bird species (35 nesting), 8 amphibian, 18 reptile, 43 mammal, and more than 290 plant species have been found at the Reserve. Adjacent protected lands held by BLM and DFG greatly expand the effective research area.

**Project History:** The Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve was established in 1979. The Reserve was appropriated for the purpose of preserving the land for teaching and research. The Reserve is named in honor of world-renowned plant geneticist and long-time professor at UC Davis and Berkeley, G. Ledyard Stebbins, an avid naturalist with a strong interest in conserving natural biotic communities.

The Conservancy has previously assisted the University with other acquisitions for inclusion in the UC Davis NRS, including the acquisition of 549 acres of land for inclusion into the 2,400-acre Quail Ridge Reserve and the acquisition of 75 acres for inclusion into the 7,050-acre McLaughlin Natural Reserve.

In 2002, to compensate for the restricted public use of properties at the Quail Ridge Reserve that were purchased with Conservancy funds, the UC Davis NRS developed a public access program at the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve. A docent training program was established and interpretive hikes are now led by docents year round, as weather permits. The Conservancy provided funding for the initial two years of the docent training program and the UC Davis NRS has since continued to fund the successful docent program.

In addition to the docent training program, the UC Davis NRS provided matching funds for trail construction and improvements along the Blue Ridge Loop Trail. The trail was graded and over

200 steps were installed at the south end of the trail. If the two privately-owned parcels are acquired by the University, the UC Davis NRS will make further improvements to the Blue Ridge Loop Trail by rerouting the trail to the Monticello Dam overlook and installing as many steps as necessary to make it safe and environmentally sound.

The Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve forms part of a regional scale conservation program, the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Partnership (BRBNACP). The BRBNACP includes over 100 partners – private landowners, public land managers, universities, nonprofit organizations, area residents, and recreationists – dedicated to the conservation, preservation, and management of nearly 800,000 acres of natural, wild, agricultural, and recreational landscape. UC Davis NRS is an active member of this group.

The Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve is an integral part of the inter-agency Putah Creek Discovery Corridor (PCDC). The PCDC Partnership includes UC Davis NRS, Solano County Parks, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Solano Irrigation District, Yolo County Parks, Solano County Water Agency, Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Council, Putah Creek Council, and DFG. The mission of the PCDC Partnership is to maintain and improve the Putah Creek Discovery Corridor as a "place for discovery" by spreading information about Putah Creek to increase public awareness and appreciation of this natural resource, build regional identity, and act as a steward for the public interest.

#### **PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$46,000
UC Davis NRS	6,200
University/UC Davis NRS (In-kind)	3,500
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<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$55,700</b>

The expected source of the proposed grant is the FY 04/05 appropriation made to the Conservancy from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40), which allocates bond funds to the Conservancy for the acquisition and protection of land and water resources consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation. The proposed project would achieve these purposes by protecting valuable open space and habitat area and providing public access for recreational and educational purposes.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, to address resource and recreational goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The property is located in Napa and Solano Counties, two of the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties in which the Conservancy is authorized, under Sections 31160 and 31161 of the Public Resources Code, to undertake projects and award grants to address resource and recreational goals for the region.

Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may act to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open space resources of regional significance. The proposed project will protect 59 acres of watershed land. The property will become part of the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve, a 576-acre reserve, home to numerous native plant and wildlife species. Cold Canyon and the adjacent Wildhorse Canyon provide a public wildlands corridor along the Blue Ridge that extends for over 70 miles. The canyons have significant habitat values including specialized rock outcrop flora and a peregrine falcon aerie and provide access to the upper watershed of Putah Creek for wildlife that is now unavailable elsewhere due to the construction of Monticello Dam in 1957.

In addition, consistent with Section 31162(d), the project will provide open space and a natural area that is accessible to the urban population of the San Francisco Bay Area for recreational and educational purposes. The property will provide continued and improved public access along the Blue Ridge Loop Trail, a 4-mile loop hike up Cold Canyon and then to the Blue Ridge with spectacular views of Lake Berryessa and the surrounding area. UC Davis NRS will restore the existing trail, which is steep and eroded, thus making the trail safer for the public.

The proposed project is consistent with Section 31163(c) in the following respects:

- (1) The project is supported by the *Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Framework* which has a primary trails and recreation goal to promote nature-based recreation in the BRBNA and identifies the Blue Ridge Loop Trail as a high recreation priority. Use of the property for recreation and education purposes is consistent with the Napa County General Plan designation as Watershed and Open Space and the Solano County General Plan designation as Watershed.
- (2) The project serves a regional constituency, in that the project will help preserve habitat and provide public access for the benefit of the population of the San Francisco Bay Area.
- (3) The project can be implemented in a timely way since agreement with the landowner has already been achieved.
- (4) The project provides benefits that would be lost if the project is not quickly implemented including trail restoration work to reduce further site erosion. The project also prevents sale to a private party which could result in the elimination of public access and/or development of the site with a residence.
- (5) Financial and technical assistance is being provided by the University and UC Davis NRS to acquire and maintain the property.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 10 Objective A**, the proposed project will result in the acquisition of 59 acres of upland habitat.

Consistent with **Goal 11 Objective A**, the proposed project will result in a significant increase in land that will be accessible to the public for recreational purposes. A portion of a popular 4-mile loop trail traverses the property and the most spectacular scenic overlook site along the entire loop trail is located on the property.

## CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

### Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project has significant public support, including that of Berryessa Trails and Conservation, Tuleyome, Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Partnership, and the Putah Creek Discovery Corridor Cooperative. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The property is located within Napa and Solano Counties and within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy.
5. **Need:** To date the grantee has invested significant staff time in negotiation and support of this acquisition. The grantee does not have access to funds for acquisition.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The property will become a part of the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve, a 576-acre site providing opportunities for long-term environmental research, education, and public outreach. The project would protect existing native California flora and fauna and provide scientific research opportunities that could assist native restoration and conservation projects all over the state. The users of the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve and the Blue Ridge Loop Trail are diverse, coming from the Bay Area as well as the Davis and Sacramento region.

### Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The property is currently up for sale. If the property were to be sold to a private party instead of the University for inclusion in the UCNRS, access over a portion of an existing public loop trail could be eliminated. In addition, although the property is not convenient for development, several very steep parcels in the vicinity have had residences constructed on them (see Exhibit 3). Continued integrity of large areas of wildland is imperative for a large-scale functioning ecosystem. Additionally, the current erosion on the property can be curtailed as soon as possible before it becomes a bigger problem.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Purchase of the property preserves habitat and open space, while providing for continued and improved public access.
9. **Conflict resolution:** Selling the property to the University allows for continued public access over the property. The Blue Ridge Loop Trail is a well-established trail that has been used by the public for years. There would likely be conflicts if a private owner attempted to prevent public access over the property.

10. **Readiness:** The grantee and the seller are both willing and eager to complete the transaction. Contingent on receiving Conservancy funding, it is anticipated that sale of the property will be completed by August 30, 2006. Once the transaction is complete, the land will immediately become part of the Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve.
11. **Cooperation:** The University has previously received Conservancy grants for the acquisition of 549 acres for inclusion in the Quail Ridge Reserve and 75 acres for inclusion in the McLaughlin Natural Reserve. The UC Davis NRS works closely with BLM, DFG, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and other Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Partners in an effort to integrate management practices at a regional scale. UC Davis NRS also participates in the Putah Creek Discovery Corridor Partnership, a partnership of owners, managers, and educators with sites along the inter-dam reach of Putah Creek working to increase public awareness and appreciation of this natural resource, build regional identity, and act as a steward for the public interest.

#### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

Acquisition of the Stebbins property is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in that it involves the acquisition of land in order to preserve open space, wildlife habitat, and existing natural conditions (14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325). Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.